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ABSTRACT

Suggested are ethical and programmatic issues for early childhood educators and administrators to consider. These issues concern children's participation in research and the process of working with researchers in day care centers. Questions to ask of researchers concern research objectives; approval of the research by a committee for human subjects use; research methods; number of subjects needed; nature of subjects' involvement; benefits of the research; methods of dealing with parents' questions and concerns; processes for obtaining subjects' cooperation and consent; means of handling children's distress; maintenance of subjects' confidentiality; staff involvement; need for changes in curriculum and environment; and use of research results. As examples, nine guidelines for research in day care centers are provided. (Author/RH)

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Researchers at the Center: Suggestions for Early Childhood Educators

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Running Head: RESEARCHERS AT THE CENTER

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ABSTRACT

A cooperative relationship among teachers and researchers can be mutually beneficial and reinforcing. The authors suggest important issues for early childhood administrators to consider about children's participation in research and about working with researchers. Guidelines for securing cooperative subjects, informing parents, and scheduling and conducting research are offered in a sample policy for researchers at the center.

Researchers at the Center: Suggestions for Early Childhood Educators

Cooperation and collaboration among researchers and teachers can be mutually beneficial and reinforcing. Teachers can learn about the research process and use research results to improve curriculum, staffing, or parent-teacher relations; teachers can provide researchers with suggestions for scheduling, obtaining parental cooperation, interacting with children, and working with staff that will make the researchers' task easier. But when researchers who are unfamiliar with your program, staff, and children request the use of your center and the involvement of the children and staff, early childhood educators must have policies and practices to inform parents and staff, ensure appropriate involvement of children, and reduce problems, conflict, or liability.

Designing research with subjects having limited cognitive and language abilities is complex. In addition to empirical questions about children's cognitive and judgmental competence, there exist important moral and ethical questions related to family autonomy, children's rights, and children's vulnerabilities (Frankel, 1978; Keith-Spiegel, 1983; Melton, 1983; Schoeman, 1982). In this article we suggest ethical and programmatic issues for early childhood educators and administrators to consider about children's participation in research and about working with researchers in the child care center.

Research Issues

Some child care centers, such as laboratory and demonstration projects associated with colleges and universities, have research as a central purpose. But most child care centers operate with service to children and families as their mission, and research at the center may

occur infrequently. For these centers, then, some important questions, listed in Table 1 and discussed below, must be considered. Discussing these issues with prospective researchers can help you to thoughtfully and systematically consider the appropriate use of children as research subjects, to develop a set of guidelines for researchers using your center, and to inform and reassure parents about the presence and function of researchers in the classroom.

Insert Table 1 Here

What Is the Purpose of the Research?

Research with young children has many purposes and results in several different kinds of information. Researchers study and describe children's developmental characteristics and abilities. For example, a study might examine moral reasoning in preschool children or intentional communication in toddlers. Researchers study environmental influences on children's behavior. Fox example, the influence of various classroom arrangements on children's peer social interaction or the effectiveness of teachers' use of praise on children's compliance might be studied. Researchers also study relationships between various characteristics of children's development, for example, the relationship between children's sociometric status and level of moral reasoning or the relationship between children's fears and their ability to distinguish fantasy from reality.

The results of this research are used to support or enhance children's development, to improve child care environments, or to modify

teachers' instructional or caregiving behaviors. Information also may be shared with parents and used to foster parent-child interactions.

Whatever the purpose or purposes of the research, its methodology and schedule should follow your center's policies and reflect a consideration of children's development and vulnerabilities.

Has the Research Been Approved by a Committee for Human Subjects Use?

Under guidelines mandated in 1974 by the National Commission for Protection of Human Subjects (1977), all research with people must be approved by the sponsoring institution or agency. The Department of Health and Human Services (1983) developed additional regulations and protection for children as research subjects. These DHHS regulations focus on avoiding or reducing risks to children, gaining informed consent or assent from children, and other policy, legal, and ethical issues related to children's rights as research participants.

In addition to the DHHS guidelines, ethical standards have been adopted by professional organizations whose members regularly conduct research with children (American Psychological Association, 1968; Society for Research in Child Development, 1973).

What Methods Will Be Used?

Research methodologies used with young children vary with the purposes of the project and the needs of the researchers. Observational studies are very unobtrusive; researchers and children do not interact. Children may not be aware of their involvement, although accommodations by the staff and changes in the program or environment may be necessary. Interviews or assessments require that researchers question or test children, usually individually and in a setting separated from other children.

How Many Children Will Be Needed?

Some researchers will need a specific number of girls and boys or children of particular age groups. If a research study is focusing on a special target group, such as handicapped children, children of single parents, or lower socioeconomic status families, care must be used to avoid identifying the children in a stigmatizing manner. Regardless of the sample or subjects involved, confidentiality of the children's identity and their responses must be ensured.

What Is the Children's Involvement?

Ask prospective researchers to explain the children's involvement in the research project. What will the children be asked to do? Where will the research, interview, or testing occur? For how many sessions will the children be needed? How long will the session(s) last? Are there any possible risks to the children who participate? How have these risks been minimized? How do the anticipated benefits outweigh possible risks? To be acceptable, risks to children posed by research participation must be minimal or negligible, no more than children encounter in routine play or learning activities.

What Are the Benefits of the Research?

Most research contributes to scientific knowledge; some research contributes practical solutions to educational or social problems. In addition, the benefits to children and to the center of the proposed project should be explained by researchers. For example, many research methodologies used with young children are designed to resemble the play and learning activities children experience in the classroom. Children can be expected to enjoy the activities and special attention they experience as research participants. Even when children do not benefit

therapeutically or medically from their research involvement, Bartholome (1976) has argued that they "benefit morally" by participating in research if they can understand the opportunity they have to help others by their research participation.

Centers also benefit by research participation. Researchers may agree to provide consultation, staff training, or parent workshops in exchange for the staff's cooperation with research.

How Will Parent's Questions and Concerns Be Addressed?

Research with children under age 18 years requires informed parental consent. This consent is obtained by fully informing the parents about the project and requesting the parent's signature on a form indicating their understanding of the research and consent for the child's research participation. Parents are usually informed about the project in a letter which explains (1) the purpose of the the research, (2) any anticipated risks from participating in the study, (3) that information obtained will be kept confidential (or anonymous), and (4) that participation in the project is voluntary. Refusal to participate (or withdrawing from the project later) should not affect the child care services provided to the child or family.

Researchers should give parents a phone number at which they can be contacted to answer parents' questions. They also should be willing to attend a parent meeting or parent conferences to discuss parents' concerns.

How Will Children's Cooperation and Consent Be Obtained?

Although parents must give consent for their children to participate in research, researchers must gain children's assent and cooperation before the children are used as research subjects. The information

offered to the child to explain research participation should be developmentally appropriate and matched to the cognitive and verbal skills of the child (Ferguson, 1978). For example, in a study of children's political knowledge and attitudes, a researcher says to a 4-year-old, "I wrote a letter to your mother to ask her to let you look at some pictures and answer some questions for me. She said it was okay. I'm talking to some of the children in your class this week; are you ready to take your turn?" The researcher should tell the child, "I am interested in knowing what children your age know about the president. You can tell me what you think, and I will write down what you say. I will not tell your parents or your teachers what you say. Do you want to ask me anything before we start?" (Allen, Freeman, & Osborne, 1986).

If a child indicates verbally or nonverbally an unwillingness to participate after several attempts to gain the child's cooperation, the child should not be made to participate regardless of parental consent.

When researchers explain the research involvement to children with developmentally appropriate language, respond with sensitivity to children's questions, and gain children's assent and cooperation with noncoercive methods, most children willingly participate and report positive or neutral reactions to their research involvement (Allen, 1987).

How Will Researchers Handle Children's Distress?

Needs of the children are very important to teachers. Researchers should explain to the staff how disruptions necessitated by the research will be kept to a minimum, how researchers will gain children's cooperation, and how interviewers will respond to children who become distressed, fatigued, or bored during research participation. For

example, a child who becomes distressed should be comforted by the researcher, immediately returned to the classroom, and reassured by the child's teacher.

How Will Subject Confidentiality be Maintained?

Researchers must have plans to keep subjects' identity either confidential or anonymous. Researchers usually assign identifying numbers to children and then refer to the subjects by number rather than by name in documents and score sheets. List of names and identifying numbers, test results for each child, and any other data should be kept locked in the research director's office, and access to the materials should be limited. After data collection and analysis are complete, materials with children's names, answers to interview questions, and responses on standardized tests should be destroyed. Audiotapes and videotapes should be erased. Research results will be reported by groups--age and gender, for example; individual children's responses or scores will not available nor disseminated.

Teachers should discuss with researchers whether the center will be identified in published reports. Many researchers will acknowledge the cooperation of the staff, parents, and children of the participating center(s) by name. To further protect the privacy of the families served by your center, you may request that the center not be named but described only, such as "a developmental program enrolling 70 children in a southeastern city of 300,000."

How Will the Staff Be Involved?

Researchers may request the involvement of staff in several ways. In observational studies, teachers may be asked to prompt children's language or reinforce target behaviors, for example, while researchers

are observing and recording children's behavior. For interviewing or standardized testing, researchers may ask teachers to help gain children's assent or to accompany children to a research room or testing site. For more extensive research involvement by staff, researchers should provide special training and opportunities to answer teachers' questions.

What Changes in Curriculum and Environment Will Be Needed?

Researchers should discuss in advance with teachers any needed changes in the daily routine, curriculum, schedule, activities, or physical organization of the environment. Most centers use supervision and organizational strategies which promote safety and quality care; any changes must be approved by the director and discussed with the teachers. Changes should be made with a minimum of disruption and should enhance the program's quality, or at least have a neutral effect.

How Will Research Results Be Used?

Most researchers will disseminate their findings by publishing in professional journals or presenting the results at professional conferences. The results also may be applied to curriculum development or policy formulation. Researchers must continue to protect the confidentiality of research participants during the dissemination of the results.

Research findings also may be used by the staff to improve the program, increase parent education and involvement, or to enhance staff development. Researchers should be willing to work with teachers to implement research results with the children, parents, or staff.

Guidelines for Research

Many centers have developed guidelines that visiting researchers must follow. Some researchers will have had extensive experience working with young children in classrooms and will have developed their skills in communicating and interacting with children. Others will find guidelines such as those presented in Table 2 to be practical, instructive, and helpful in securing cooperative subjects, reassuring parents, and scheduling and conducting research in your program.

Insert Table 2 Here

Research with children creates complex issues and adult concern for children's emotional and cognitive well-being, for family privacy, and for teachers' responsibility. Resolving these issues and protecting children through collaborative efforts among researchers and teachers can be mutually rewarding. Sensitive and well-informed teachers can work with researchers at the center to provide appropriate and constructive experiences for children as research participants.

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Table 1

Sample Form for Researchers Requesting Child Care Center Use

1. What is the purpose of the research?
2. Has the research been approved by a Committee for Human Subjects Use?
3. What method(s) will be used to collect data?
4. How many children will be needed as research subjects?
5. What is the children's involvement?
6. What are the benefits to children, parents, and the center?
7. What arrangements will be made for answering parents' questions or concerns?
8. How will children's cooperation and consent to participate in the research be gained?
9. How will a situation in which a child becomes distressed or frightened during the interview or testing be handled?
10. Who will have access to the information collected? How will the identity of the subjects be protected? How will the information be kept confidential or anonymous?
11. In what way, if any, will the staff be involved?
12. What changes, if any, will be needed in the program, curriculum, or environment?
13. What use is planned for the results?

Table 2

Sample Guidelines for Research in Child Care

1. Discuss with the Director and Head Teacher(s) the schedule for the project. Determine the best days and times to observe/interview. The Director can provide a daily schedule for the infant, toddler, and preschool programs as well as a yearly calendar indicating any center closing dates.
2. Send a letter to parents explaining the research and request the return of a signed informed consent form.
3. Researchers who will be interacting with children or taking children from the classroom to a research room or site should spend time over at least a 1-week period in the classroom becoming acquainted with the children.
4. Research goals will be better accomplished if interview or testing sessions with each child are relatively short--10 minutes maximum with toddlers, 15 minutes with preschoolers.
5. Inform the head teacher each day as children are taken from the classroom to the research room. Also, sign each child in and out on the list posted for this purpose. Inform the teacher supervising the child at the time that the two of you will return "in about 5 minutes." This is essential information for the teacher, and it also can be reassuring to the child. Notify the same teacher when the child is returned to the classroom.

Table 2 (continued)

Sample Guidelines for Research in Child Care

6. Attempt to obtain the child's assent to participate by saying, "I asked your mother/father/parents if it was all right to talk with you and she/he/they said, 'Yes.' I am talking with most of the children in your class this week; are you ready to take your turn now?" or, "I would like for you to take a turn now; can you leave this activity and come with me to the research room?" If the child indicates verbally or nonverbally an unwillingness to participate, the researcher should say, "I will check back later to see if you are ready." If the child refuses to participate after 2 or 3 requests, the child will be dropped from the study, regardless of parental consent to participate.
7. If a child becomes inattentive or asks about returning to the classroom during the research interview or testing, the researcher may say, "I have only 2 more questions I would like for you to answer." or, "One more try, and then you will be finished." However, if a child becomes fatigued, uncooperative, or distressed, try to comfort and reassure the child and return the child to the classroom. Inform the child's teacher about the child's distress; the teacher also can comfort and reassure the child. The researcher may want to attempt to continue the interview another day. No child should be forced to participate without the child's cooperation, regardless of parental permission to include the child in the project.

Table 2 (continued)

Sample Guidelines for Research in Child Care
8. Researchers should wear a name tag while at the center.
9. It is center policy that at the conclusion of data collection and analyses, researchers will prepare a 1- or 2-page letter for the parents and the staff informing them of the results of the study.